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Testimony of University Settlement before the New York City Council

Joint Executive Budget Hearing

Committee on Finance, Chair Justin Brannan
Committee on Aging, Chair Crystal Hudson

Submitted by Rosemarie Salazar, Director of our Older Adults Center, the Meltzer Social Club, and Meals on Wheels, University Settlement

May 17, 2024

My name is Rosemarie Salazar, and I am University Settlement's Director of our Older Adults Center, the Meltzer Social Club, and Meals on Wheels on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

University Settlement urges the City Council to oppose the cuts to Older Adults programs. As one of the fastest growing age demographics in New York, but the smallest funded city agency, older adults need more investment, not cuts.

We fear that these drastic budget cuts to Older Adults centers (OACs) could eventually lead to centers offering fewer activities and necessary services for older adults.

The participants who come to the Older adult center at 189 Allen Street establish friendships with peers and strong relationships with staff. Isolation can lead to deteriorating mental and physical health of older adults, and OACs play an integral role in ensuring the health of our eldest New Yorkers. Many of our participants stay in our center for the entire day, meaning they arrive at 9 am for breakfast and leave at 4 or 5 pm after a day of dancing, exercising, singing, playing games, or just relaxing with friends, sometimes walking out with staff who are closing up the space. The rest of the participants stay for several hours. They love being in our center, and we are privileged to serve them.

Our staff works hard to develop culturally specific programming that meets the interests of our diverse group of older adults, keeping them intellectually and physically engaged. We are trusted by our participants, which is why OAC staff are also often the people that older adults turn to when they need help filling out paperwork or resolving health insurance or benefits issues, or when they have complicated family situations and



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needed someone to talk to. Older Adults rely on our center, and centers like ours across NYC, to maintain their physical and mental health, to have access to nutritious meals, to maintain their benefits and health insurance, and to find joy and connection.

The City's argument is that OACs are being underutilized. While it may be that some centers have still not rebounded completely to pre-Covid numbers, we believe there are many reasons for that.

First, the pandemic had a much longer-lasting impact on our older population—many remained fearful of gathering in-person due to health concerns, and other former attendees developed mobility or health issues during the years of the pandemic. The City should do more outreach to connect with younger Older Adults and inform them of what OACs can provide.

Second, our older adults are more aware and sensitive to feeling unsafe and not wanting to navigate the streets in the dark. In the winter months, we would rarely have older adults stay past 3 pm because it would get dark earlier. Now, this is shifting due to Daylights Savings Time.

Third, our older adults are more sensitive to changes, particularly in the community that they build and the services that are offered. For example, when we had to increase the optional contribution for meals by less than a dollar due to inflation, we noticed we had participants who would split breakfasts rather than order their own.

For older adults who have difficulty making connections, staff or community turnover can lead them to stop or limit attending. If their favorite center is closed, it's very possible that an older adult will not seek out another one – both because they are not comfortable joining a new community and because there are no centers that are geographically close enough.

We are deeply concerned that the threat of closing centers and the limiting of staffing and activities at centers will push older adults away from the social activities and resources that they need to live healthy, robust lives.

We are also deeply concerned about the message that these budget cuts send to our participants. They look around and see the crumbling infrastructure, the loss of programming and staff, and they take it personally. They feel as if their city has abandoned them, and this leads to even more isolation.

Please reverse these drastic budget cuts and support our older New Yorkers. Along with LiveOn NY, we have also submitted testimony that our older adults themselves have submitted in opposition to these budget cuts.